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## The Occurrence of Zero-derived Nouns in the English Verbo-nominal *have a N* Construction

This article is based on the research which I carried out for my doctoral dissertation, published in its revised version in 1993 as *The Syntax, Semantics and Derivation of Bare Nominalisations in English* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego). It exemplifies my interest in nominalisations, reflected later in my 2005 postdoctoral dissertation *Passive Nominals in English and Polish: An Optimality-Theoretic Analysis* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego), and in mixed categories (including participial adjectives, to which I devoted a series of articles). A more recent discussion of English complex predicates, such as *have a swim*, *take a look*, or *give a shout*, can be found in my 2012 paper "On English verbo-nominal constructions and different construals of situations" (in: *Image, Imagery, Imagination in Contemporary English Studies*, ed. by Bożena Cetnarowska and Olga Glebova, Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo AJD).

### 1. Introductory

The present paper investigates English complex predicates containing the verb *have*, such as *have a swim*, *have a lie-down* and *have a sip of the tea*. In Section 2 it will be demonstrated that such predicates should be treated as verbo-nominal combinations (consisting of a finite verb and a zero-derived deverbal noun), and not as a Verb+Verb (i.e. finite verb plus a nonfinite verb) construction. Section 3 will present a pragmatic constraint on the use of non-established zero-derived action nouns. In Section 4 I shall focus on the semantic conditions on the use of complex predicates with the verb *have*. Section 5 will offer some brief comments on the stylistic value of the *have a N* construction.

### 2. Nontensed verb stems or zero-derived nouns?

WIERZBICKA (1982) and WALINSKA DE HACKBEIL (1984) analyze complex predicates as consisting of two verbs: a tensed form of a semantically light verb (e.g. *give*, *have*,

*take*) and a nontensed form of a semantically “full” verb (e.g. *swim*, *look*, *jump*). The two verb forms are joined by *a*, which is a marker of aspect and has the same phonetic shape as the indefinite article in English.

In the present paper, however, *have a swim* and *give a jump* will be regarded as verbo-nominal constructions, as in, for instance, CATTELL (1984), JESPERSEN (1954), NICKEL (1968), STEIN (1991) and QUIRK *et al.* (1985). The right-most constituents of complex predicates are verb stem nouns, i.e. nouns derived from verb stems by means of conversion (zero-derivation). Zero-derived nouns can take the declensional ending -s, can be premodified by possessives, adjectives or adjectival phrases and postmodified by genitive *of*-phrases, as shown in (1a)-(1d) below. The nominal constituents of complex predicates can be fronted in relative clauses and occasionally moved to the subject position in passive sentences, e.g. in (1e)-(1f).

- (1) a. Can I have two guesses?  
 b. I took several rides in his car.  
 c. Have a suck of my orange.  
 d. At 5.30 she would have her chat with Mrs Jones from next-door (STEIN 1991, ex. 74).  
 e. It's the best laugh we've had for ages.  
 f. Sue was given a hug by Bill.

As observed in TAYLOR (1989) and TWARDZISZ (1997), impossibility of passivization of sentences containing *have a N* predicates, e.g. \**A walk was had by Mary yesterday* and \**A look was had by my mother at my new novel*, should be attributed to the non-participant status of the event noun in the object position.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the unacceptability (or at best marginal acceptability) of such passive sentences is not a proof of the verbal status of the lexemes *walk* and *look* in the phrases *have a walk* and *have a look*.

The assumption of the nominal character of the lexemes *hug*, *look*, *walk* and *ride* in complex predicates is further confirmed by the occurrence of verbo-nominal constructions in which the noun exhibits an overt suffix, e.g. *have a conversation*, *give a letter a re-reading* or *make an inspection*.

### 3. Conditions on the use of non-established zero-derived nouns

Once we attribute the nominal status to the right-hand constituent of complex predicates such as *have a swim*, *have a listen*, *have a read*, *have a choose* and *have an argue*, we need to explain why some of those zero-derived nouns cannot occur

<sup>1</sup> The same factor accounts for the impossibility of passivizing sentences such as *John resembles his father*, *He grinned a tired grin* or *The colonel died a peaceful death*. In terms of cognitive linguistics, such sentences do not exhibit energy transfer between the entities involved.

outside of *have a N* construction, as is confirmed by the unacceptability of the examples in (2) below:

- (2) a. \*It was a very good choose.  
 b. \*A read of Mary's letter made me cry.  
 c. \*I was upset after my argue with Peter last night.  
 d. \*A listen to his new record convinced me that it was not worth buying.

The zero-derived noun *choose*, *read*, *argue* and *listen* would be replaced by most speakers of English in sentences in (2a)-(2d) by related suffixal derivatives, i.e. *choice*, *reading*, *argument* and *listening*. It will be proposed below, as in CETNAROWSKA (1993a, b), that the zero-derived nouns occurring in (2) are not established<sup>2</sup> in their nominal use. Therefore the pragmatic constraint<sup>3</sup> given in (3) below predicts the infelicity of novel zero-derivatives which occur outside of familiar constructions, such as complex predicates, prepositional phrases of purpose (e.g. *go for a quiet read*) or elliptic clauses (such as *One listen to their records and you'll love them!*).

- (3) "The speaker is unlikely to use a non-established zero-derived formation in syntactic and situational contexts which do not signal unambiguously  
 a) the intended syntactic category of the novel zero-derivative  
 b) its intended semantic interpretation."

Familiarity with the *have a N* frame allows the listener/reader to identify the lexemes *argue*, *choose*, *listen* and *read* as nouns (as indicated by the presence of the indefinite article and of optional adjectival modifiers) and to assign to them the sense 'an act, episode or occasion of V-ing'. The semantic interpretation of the *have a N* construction will be examined in greater detail in Section 4. Some comments on the stylistic value of complex predicates with *have* will be offered in Section 5. The non-occurrence of some potential zero-derived action nominalizations in the *have a N* frame, e.g. \**have a discuss* or \**have an eat*, can be then explained by their incompatibility with semantic constraints on this particular verbo-nominal construction.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The term „established” is used here as in BAUER (1983) to include both institutionalized and lexicalized lexemes (or senses of lexemes).

<sup>3</sup> This constraint can be derived from the Maxim of Quantity formulated in GRICE (1975).

<sup>4</sup> I disagree here with STEIN (1991:7) who assumes that „the existence of a particular deverbal conversion noun in English predetermines the occurrence of a V+N frame.” Her claim that there are no deverbal conversion nouns restricted to the *have a N* frame only is undermined by the occurrence of nouns such as *argue* or *choose* only in the combinations *have an argue* and *have a choose* (in Australian English, as shown in WIERZBICKA 1982).

#### 4. The semantic formula for *have a N*

WIERZBICKA (1982) proposes the formula in (4) to describe the semantic interpretation of complex predicates with the verb *have*:

- (4) “X had a V =  
 For some time, not a long time  
 X was doing something that could cause him to come to feel/know something  
 he was doing it not because he wanted anything to happen to anything other  
 than himself  
 he could do it again.”

When translated into more conventional linguistic terms, the formula in (4) reads: the *have a N* construction is agentive, experiencer-oriented, antidurative, atelic and reiterative. Stein (1991), who also examines in detail the verbo-nominal *have a N* construction, assigns to it the features [+human agent] and [+temporary]. The requirement of agentivity (i.e. conscious control) in the interpretation of complex predicates with the verb *have* rules out phrases such as \**have a die*. The predicates *have a faint* and *have a fall* are felicitous only if some control or intention is attributed to the human participant.<sup>5</sup> The experiencer orientation of the *have a N* combination explains the contrast between the interpretation of (5a) and (5b), pointed out in CATTELL (1984):

- (5) a. Harry had an enjoyable dance with Sue. (He enjoyed it).  
 b. Harry did an enjoyable dance with Sue. (The audience enjoyed it).

Moreover, the experiencer-oriented perspective suggests that the activity denoted by the *have a N* combination usually causes the human participants to feel pleasure, as in (6a)-(6c), or can be construed as having a beneficial effect for the doer(s), as in (6d)-(6g).

- (6) a. Have a lie on the sofa!  
 b. ‘We were only having a little bet’, mumbled the little man.  
 c. Have a lick of my icecream.  
 d. I had a shave and a comb.  
 e. [...] a much better fellow he would be if he had a good swear now and again (JESPERSEN 1954: 117).  
 f. Let’s sit down and have a talk to sort it out.  
 g. I want to have a look at the prices.

<sup>5</sup> The expressions *have a heart attack*, *have a mental breakdown* and *have a shock* are not compatible with the schema given in (4) because they do not represent the same construction as the complex predicates *have a lie-down* and *have a chat*.

The antidurative character of complex predicates with the verb *have* implies that the action takes some time but does not extend over prolonged periods.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the sentence *\*He had a swim for two hours* is unacceptable. Nouns denoting momentary events (points in time) are acceptable in the *have a N* frame with optional premodifiers such as *long* or *slow* if these events are interpreted as being relatively long, as in (7a) and (7b).

- (7) a. She had a good shriek.  
b. They had a long fall.

The atelic element in the interpretation of the *have a N* frame predicts the infelicity of sentences denoting activities which involve some purpose or endpoint, e.g. *\*We had a run to the post-office* and *\*He had a kick of the football to score the next point*. The unacceptability of the complex predicates *\*have a destroy of the exhibits*, *\*have an eat of your sandwich* and *\*have a drink up of whisky* stems from the impossibility of their reiterative interpretation (required by the formula in 4 above). The sentences *Have a drink of your whisky!* and *Have a bite of my sandwich!* are felicitous since one can have another drink of whisky or another bite of the sandwich. In contrast, once someone has destroyed the exhibits, drunk up the whisky or eaten the sandwich, s/he cannot do it again.

## 5. The stylistic value of *have a N* construction

WIERZBICKA (1982) describes complex predicates with the verb *have* as characterized by informality. This feature of the *have a N* construction accounts, according to WIERZBICKA (1982), for the impossibility of the phrases *\*have a converse* or *\*have a urinate*, which would sound too formal (as opposed to the colloquial phrases *have a chat* and *have a pee*).

Since Australian culture is generally associated with greater informality than British culture, the colloquialness of *have a N* predicates can be construed as an explanation for much higher frequency of occurrence of this construction in Australian English than in British English. However, Stein (1991) demonstrates that the *have a N* frame can be used in a formal register of British English in suggestions which express personal courtesy, personal attention and care for another person, as in (8a) and (8b) below:

- (8) a. Do have a wash (before you come down) (STEIN 1991 ex. 102c).  
b. Minister, would you like to have a smoke before we go in? (STEIN 1991, ex. 106).

<sup>6</sup> Within the framework of cognitive grammar, as in TWARDZISZ (1997), zero-derived event nouns are termed „episodic nominalizations.” Episodic nominalizations are analyzed as referring to bounded events (i.e. limited to restricted time domains) but with the notion of time „wiped out.” Therefore, they do not normally allow modifiers which make them appear internally „uneven,” i.e. discontinuous or unstopable.

The greater frequency of the verbo-nominal *have a N* combination in Australian English should, consequently, be treated not as evidence for the stylistic marking of this construction but as a result of regional variation. There is a difference between the use of *have* and *take* in complex predicates in British English and American English, noted in QUIRK et al. (1985) and shown in (9) below, which cannot be reduced to the difference in the register.

(9) a. Have a bath/look/shave/swim (BrE).

b. Take a bath/look/shave/swim (AmE).

STEIN (1991) observes that the non-occurrence of the predicates *\*have a urinate*, *\*have a converse* and *\*have a contemplate* may be due not to their undesirable stylistic value (as is assumed in WIERZBICKA 1991) but to the existence of formal constraints on zero-derivation in English, formulated in MARCHAND (1969: 364). Disyllabic and trisyllabic Latinate verbs derive their abstract nouns by suffixation rather than by conversion, e.g. the verbs *converse* and *contemplate* give rise to the event nouns *conversation* and *contemplation*. Moreover, there is a tendency not to form zero-derived nouns from suffixal verbs, such as *urinate* or *contemplate*. Suffixes function as categorizers and recognition of a novel zero-derived noun terminating in a verbalizing suffix (e.g. *\*a contemplate*) would be particularly difficult for the listener/reader.

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